

# **Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation Investment Strategies Committee**

## **Final Meeting Summary**

**March 29, 2000**

*Adopted April 12, 2000*

**Present:** Dale Stedman, Chair, Bill Lampson, Vice-Chair, Don Briscoe, Representative Shirley Hankins, Peter Hurley, Bettie Ingham, Andrew Johnsen, John Kelly, Charles Mott, Patricia Otley

**Absent:** Ted Bottiger (Pat Jones attended on his behalf), Senator Mary Margaret Haugen

---

The Chair called the meeting to order at 8:40 a.m. The Committee reviewed the minutes from the February 9<sup>th</sup> meeting and approved them as presented.

### **Public Comment**

Ron Scheck, Transit Solutions, urged the Committee to consider multimodal solutions to the state's transportation problems.

### **Washington's Short Line Railroads**

Dave Parkinson of Puget Sound and Pacific Railroad, gave the Committee a brief overview of short line railroads in Washington. He reviewed Puget Sound and Pacific Railroad, public benefits provided by the short line railroad system, the system's financial needs, and how those financial needs are met.

Puget Sound and Pacific Railroad operates 3 railroads, one of which is located in Washington State. The Puget Sound and Pacific Railroad was acquired from Burlington Northern Santa Fe in 1997 because BNSF could not operate it efficiently as a part of their larger system. Since 1997, business on the railroad has increased dramatically from 7,000 carloads per year to nearly 13,000 carloads per year.

Parkinson attributed the improvements in the railroad's business to a variety of improved efficiencies and programs. As a result of technological advances, only one person is needed to operate a train. This efficiency results in an employee/track-mile ratio of 1 to 7 for Puget Sound and Pacific Railroad, in comparison with a larger railroad's typical ratio of 1 to 1. In response to a surplus of logs on the Olympic Peninsula and a shortage of logs in Oregon and Northern California, the railroad developed a log-move program that currently moves 20 cars per day. Puget Sound and Pacific also developed a chemical

transport facility funded by the Freight Rail Assistance program, which moves chemical transport from the highways onto rail. The most successful program is the “grain train” that moves grain from Eastern Washington to ports in Western Washington. This service is not offered by larger railroads as they reserve their grain cars for longer hauls departing from the Midwest. The “grain train” service earns a profit for the state.

Parkinson listed benefits offered by short line railroads including:

- They are essential to the development of Grays Harbor and other ports.
- Short line railroads are an integral part of the economic development and growth (in some cases, survival) of many smaller communities in the state.
- Taking some large trucks off the road can reduce congestion as well as road maintenance and repair needs.
- A 1995 WSDOT study concluding that the existence of a viable short line system in the state saves \$30 million per year in highway repair costs.

Parkinson noted that freight moved by rail requires about one-third of the energy of moving an equivalent ton of freight over the road. Parkinson also noted that trains are more environmentally friendly in terms of air pollutant emissions than trucks.

The short line railroad system is in great need of capital investments, including upgrades from light to heavy rail and bridge repairs. In late 1980s, a panel concluded that the state should invest approximately \$10 million per year in the short line railroad system, but to date the state has paid only \$1 million per year (with exception of the “grain train” program). Currently there is talk in Olympia of increasing the state’s contribution to \$5 million per year.

Parkinson ended by conveying to the Committee the need for a balanced freight transportation system that takes advantage of both trucks and railroads, with special attention given to creating effective private-public partnerships.

Charlie Howard with the Washington State Department of Transportation commented on the three basic objectives of the state’s freight rail program: to keep short line railroads operating, to preserve trackage and right-of-way, and to preserve corridors.

### **Developing Committee Options: “20-Year Investments”**

Kjris Lund, project manager for the Commission, presented a summary of activities regarding preparation for the full Commission retreat on May 18. She reminded the Committee that the objective of the May retreat is organizing information which will be shared with the public on the variety of options to stimulate discussion and receive public input. She presented the Committee with a potential framework for organizing options and showed how the Investment Strategies Committee fits into that framework.

Some Committee members expressed concern regarding whether adhering to such an explicit and revenue-dependent framework would constrain the Committee’s ability to find effective solutions to the state’s transportation problems. Peter Hurley reviewed the

guidelines for investment strategies that the Committee had discussed at the previous meeting. The Chair reminded the Committee of the criteria they developed earlier in the Commission process, noting especially “able to win public support.” Lund noted the importance of making the Commission’s product as tangible as possible for the public’s sake.

The Chair encouraged the Committee members to engage in a declaration of their concerns and opinions in order to put all the issues on the table. The following is a list of the concerns that Committee members shared:

- The Commission’s objective is to provide good information and options in terms that the public understands.
- The Commission’s challenge is to show the public the steps needed to accomplish an improved transportation system, what the cost will be, and how the outcome will look.
- The Commission should act as a leader, and it has the opportunity to do something magnificent with the state’s transportation system – solve the transportation problems, provide higher levels of service, accommodate the expected growth, and make this a better place to live.
- If the Commission does not solve transportation problems in a bold way, we will see industries exit the state.
- The Committee needs to move out the box and create a vision that will excite people.
- The Commission must make the public aware of the realities of our transportation system needs.
- The Committee’s suggestions for investment strategies should be based on an incremental 20-year scope but at a higher level. The problems are immediate. The bold and significant changes the Committee can recommend will take 20 years to implement; the Committee should not be satisfied with just fixing potholes.
- The public is looking for good leadership, and they are willing to invest in more than the Commission may believe.
- The message the Commission and government should have received from the passage of I-695 is to be efficient, be fair, and solve problems.
- If the Commission generates a plan it truly believes in, members will be able to sell it to the public.
- The Committee should focus on definitive and specific rather than more general recommendations in order to be understood and appreciated by the public and legislators.
- If the Commission could truly accomplish something in each Committee, the combination of the efforts of all Committees would be dramatic.
- The Benchmark Committee has determined that one goal of the state’s transportation system is to achieve a level of congestion equivalent to the national average. It is impossible for the state to reach this congestion level without an increase in the level of investment.
- The Committee needs to spend some time addressing what each option will cost.

- Of all agencies contributing to the work of the Committee, WSDOT has provided the best information. The Committee should not “take a shot” at the current system; it will be difficult to get more “efficiency” out of the current system, and the Committee should not use the current transportation system as a crutch. Instead, the Committee should have higher-level vision for the future.
- The framework that Lund presented is a “sell strategy” – a way to lead the public through a thought process in which they can determine what is needed to achieve certain levels of transportation service.
- Part of the problem of choosing investment strategies is that each individual sees the problem in different way. While the Puget Sound region is primarily concerned with congestion relief, many other parts of the state are primarily concerned with maintenance and preservation.
- The corridor approach is sensitive to regional issues.
- The Committee’s mission is to determine how much the state should invest in which priorities. The Committee needs to decide how the state should prioritize investments; the Committee needs to be much more specific in its recommendations.
- The Committee should present a plan that will excite people.
- Congestion relief is not possible or even desirable. To solve the transportation problem the state needs to provide access and choices.
- Policy leaders and citizens expect the Commission to present them with a description of the qualitative and quantitative changes that will result from the Commission’s recommendations.
- The Committee needs to develop a document that explains what investment strategies will be used and what specific results will occur.
- Important to voters is a product that is tangible and that illustrates cause and effect.

Kjris Lund reviewed some of the targets that the Benchmark Committee has identified, focusing on those with a specific relationship to the Investment Strategies Committee. The relevant benchmarks include having 0 percent of roadways in poor physical condition by the year 2020; 0 structurally deficient bridges by the year 2020; and traffic congestion at a level no worse than the national mean of urban interstates by the year 2020.

Jerry Cormick, consultant to the Commission, led the Committee in a discussion of a draft list of options regarding More Efficient Use of Transportation Facilities that staff had prepared. The following summary organizes the comments by the corresponding option.

#### A1

Reword this option to say, “Better coordination of planning, funding, investment, and decision-making in all jurisdictions. To accomplish this, a new, regional approach to transportation planning, funding, investment, and decision-making should be implemented.”

Characteristics of a successful regional system include the following items: (1) availability of block grant state funds; (2) regional ability to seek ballot approval on significant revenue decisions within the region; (3) focus on corridors; and (4) integration with land use planning.

Improved efficiency and other benefits will result from the implementation of option A1. Primarily, this option deals with the ongoing public perception that wherever you are, the money is being spent somewhere else. By permitting the region to determine where transportation funds are spent, critical regional transportation projects have a better chance of being implemented. Also, the ability to forecast funding increases. This improves the planning process and allows decision-makers to consider the corridor as a whole. In addition, transportation investment can be de-politicized. In some cases, availability drives the demand for transportation funds; the Committee would prefer that need drives the demand for transportation funds.

The Committee noted that not all transportation funds should be regionalized, only a portion of them. A formula could be created based on criteria that could be applied. Charlie Howard with the Washington State Department of Transportation clarified the statistic regarding the distribution of transportation funds in California: 75% of mobility funds are distributed to regions. It was also noted that in the past, federal and state money coming to regional levels has been spread thinly, “like peanut butter.” Each jurisdiction wants a share, which can lead to improving a lot of little problems rather than addressing larger, more significant problems.

## A2

Reword this option to say, “Use a corridor approach to transportation planning and funding to invest the most effective mix of strategies in the most heavily traveled (by people and goods) corridors.”

The corridor approach suggests that transportation dollars should first be invested in the corridors most heavily traveled by people and goods. Characteristics of this approach include the following items: (1) fixing the worst bottlenecks and congested areas first; (2) improving maintenance and preservation of the routes most highly traveled by people and goods; (3) keeping the most heavily used transit corridors in good condition; and (4) promoting public-private initiatives.

Improved efficiency and other benefits will result from the implementation of option A2. It encourages regions to consider the whole area and invest in longer corridors instead of fixing small stretches here and there. Also, a mix of strategies allows movement of more people. A corridor approach will increase consistency and decrease duplication.

### A3

Reword this option to say, “All jurisdictions should make preservation (funding least life-cycle cost) and maintenance of the existing transportation infrastructure the top priority. Existing transportation infrastructure should be maintained at a minimum standard throughout the system, availability of funding to support maintenance will need to be allocated.”

Improved efficiency and other benefits will result from the implementation of option A3. Drivers and transit users will enjoy a smoother and quieter ride. It will also result in automobile maintenance savings. Additionally, funding least life-cycle costs is the minimum cost option and is predictable.

### A4

Reword this option to say “Funding at the state and regional jurisdictions should be flexible as possible with regards to improvements or new investments so the worst problems can be funded first or as they emerge.”

Encourage appropriate changes in state statutes and regulations to allow more flexibility in use of funds for improvements; the specific changes need to be defined.

The benefits of flexibility include de-politicizing transportation investment and support of bundling funds.

### A5

Combine this option with A3.

### A6

Replace “across all jurisdictions” with “multi-jurisdictional,” and replace “across all modes” with “multimodal.”

### A7

Combine this option with A3.

### A8

The Committee suggested the Revenue Committee should address the “increased heavy vehicle fees” issue, and members requested more information on the other two issues.

#### A9

The Committee accepted this option but requested additional information. They noted that exceptions exist, so the policy or ordinance will need to allow for judgment.

#### A10

The Committee suggested this option be moved to the “20-Year Investments” area but also requested additional information from staff regarding this option. It was noted that the Committee should consider the option of privatizing park-and-ride lots.

#### A11

The Committee requested additional information from staff regarding this option. A discussion is needed on the specific forms of Intelligent Transportation Systems to be recommended. It was noted that additional forms of Intelligent Transportation Systems exist beyond those currently listed below the option statement.

#### A12

The Committee requested additional information from staff regarding this option. A discussion is needed on the specific forms of Traffic Demand Management to be recommended. It was noted that with this option, a relatively small amount of investment could achieve dramatic results.

#### A13

Reword this option to suggest more than just public dialogue and make congestion pricing an option.

#### **Next Meeting**

The next Committee meeting is scheduled for **Wednesday, April 12, 2000, 8:30 a.m.–4:00 p.m.**, in the SeaTac Room at the SeaTac Holiday Inn.

The Committee adjourned at 4:00 p.m.